

As the FCC reconsiders its media ownership rules, please don't allow more media consolidation. It has only been in the last couple of years that I've come to realize how much information I've been missing because of consolidation. And how did I discover this and what's been missing? Well, it certainly didn't come by my nightly TV news, or my local radio station--not even through my local newspaper. I discovered it in books and on the Internet. But these sources discuss news long after its news. And while I enjoy both forms of media, I don't see either as the best way to get the up-to-the-minute information needed to be an informed and involved citizen.

Like everyone else, I have forever listened to, watched and read the media that's supposed to keep me informed. Sometimes they do a good job, sometimes not. But on balance, I believed I was getting all the news worth reporting. Then, one day, I began to get indications that there was more to some stories than was being told. Long disregarded rumors started coming to the surface with buzz that they were true. The more I heard/read, the more I dug. To my shock and disappointment, I discovered that for far too long, I'd been kept in the dark on important issues that were replaced by "entertainment," light and one-sided news fair.

Two things astound me about the whole thing. How did they think they'd get away with it and don't they realize the success of our democracy is dependant on an informed electorate? Okay, I understand that some of these statements make me sound like a paranoid radical with a bunch of conspiracy theories. Like, the first part of this paragraph: who are they? Well, I kind of wish I was, because this stuff scares me. The world isn't getting any safer and our democracy is not getting any stronger at a time when it should be doing so. And yes, I'm just your average guy who works hard and tries to stay informed. But the things that I haven't been learning from the press concern me and I believe they are the result of media consolidation and plain old greed.

I'm sure I'm not telling you anything you don't already know or that has not finally come out in recent months, but I will repeat it for the record nonetheless. Because the Iraqi war had had and is having a tremendous impact on everything, it's a perfect example of what I'm talking about. As has now been told on PBS and in books, during the run up to the war and for the first few years of it, the subject was simply not covered with any meaningful depth. Oh yes, we'd see reporters in the cockpits of war planes, interviewing pilots about how it feels to be at the controls. But we almost never saw journalists at the target end, asking people huddled in their homes what it feels like not to know what the next moment will bring; explaining the issues and digging for the truth. During war, the media have a responsibility to show the true face of the conflict because so many sacrifices are made in the name of the war. And because war is a last resort, everyone should be kept informed.

So, was this government censorship? No, in fact it wasn't (although the government certainly encouraged a lack of coverage and even got in the way of it at times). The sanitizing of the news was self-inflicted by the media and their corporate owners. It was a rare opportunity to get on the

good side of officials who control how big they can grow and what they can do. Of course, I learned this long after the fact in at least three studies done on the subject. The first I saw, released in 2005, came from the American University's School of Communications. It reported that media outlets acknowledged they self-censored their reporting on the Iraq invasion out of concerns about public reaction to graphic images and content.

But how could the press corps of an entire country all march in lockstep when it came to the Iraqi war? It would seem to be a feat of unimaginable proportions--Herculean. Well, in a democracy, that's the way it's supposed to be--too many outlets to get everyone singing the same tune; too much diversity to only allow one side to be heard. And that's the way it was in this country not too long ago. But all that has been slowly changing, consolidating.

Today, the media companies task with keeping the electorate informed have become fewer while at the same time becoming bigger. What was once a public trust is now a corporate trust (as in money). And thus to kill coverage of a subject is really not that hard, as long as you've got the money or influence to do so. You only have to know six people. Okay, maybe that's an exaggeration, but you get the idea.

Things change so fast that I haven't had the time to update this list recently, but it's still in the ballpark and my count (using both hands so as not to make a mistake) is six--see for yourself.

- 1) Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation owns FOX, HarperCollins, New York Post, Weekly Standard, TV Guide, DirecTV, 35 TV stations and given his recent astronomical bid for Dow Jones will soon likely own The Wall Street Journal.
- 2) General Electric owns NBC, CNBC, MSNBC, Telemundo, Bravo, Universal Pictures and 28 TV stations.
- 3) Time Warner owns AOL, CNN, Warner Bros., Time and its 130-plus magazines.
- 4) Disney owns ABC, Disney Channel, ESPN, 10 TV and 72 radio stations.
- 5) Viacom owns CBS, MTV, Nickelodeon, Paramount Pictures, Simon & Schuster and 183 U.S. radio stations
- 6) Bertelsmann owns Random House and its more than 120 imprints worldwide, and Gruner + Jahr and its more than 110 magazines in 10 countries

Yes, there are the exceptions to the rule of self-censorship on the war--McClatchy-(Knight-Ridder) for one--but even some of their papers refused to publish the truth or buried the stories in the back pages. Dissent simply was not written and was generally considered unpatriotic. Some even lost their jobs over it. Sadly, as we all know, dissent and the open expression of a variety of opinions is the stuff that keeps a democracy healthy and alive. But for a period in our recent history, it was nowhere to be found in terms of the war.

As Phil Donahue, the former host of MSNBC's highest-rated show who was fired by the network in February 2003 for bringing on anti-war voices, told "Democracy Now!," "We have more [TV] outlets now, but most of them sell the Bowflex machine. The rest of them are Jesus and jewelry. There really isn't diversity in the media anymore. Dissent? Forget about it."

The lack of diversity in ownership helps explain the lack of diversity in the news. When George W. Bush first came to power, the media watchdogs Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) looked at who appeared on the evening news on ABC, CBS and NBC. Ninety-two percent of all U.S. sources interviewed were white, 85 percent were male, and where party affiliation was identifiable, 75 percent were Republican.

In the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, there was even less diversity of opinion on the airwaves. During the critical two weeks before and after Colin Powell's speech to the United Nations where he made his case for war, FAIR found that just three out of 393 sources -- fewer than 1 percent -- were affiliated with anti-war activism. Three out of almost 400 interviews. And that was on the "respectable" evening news shows of CBS, NBC, ABC and PBS.

This and other studies make it clear that, for a time, our media was not serving in the interest of a democratic society, where a diversity of views is vital to shaping informed opinions. Instead, it looks more like a well-oiled propaganda machine that repackages government spin and passes it off as journalism. Nothing could be a greater threat to our national security than this.

And then there are the actions of the FCC itself. More perplexing and often flying under the radar, the agency responsible for keeping media consistent with the public interest has not had a very good record of doing so. In the spring of 2003, Michael Powell tried to hand over the airwaves and newspapers to fewer and fewer tycoons by further loosening restrictions on how many media outlets a single company could own. Powell tried to scrap 30-year-old rules that limited the reach of any television network to no more than 35 percent of the national population, and limits on cross-ownership that, for example, prevented newspapers from buying television or radio stations in the same city. The new rules would have allowed a broadcast network to buy up stations that together reached 45 percent of the national population.

Why would he do such a thing and where'd this all come from? A little digging (since it's not something the media would cover of course) brings one reason to light. The attack on the existing media-ownership rules came from predictable corners: Both Viacom, which owns CBS, and Rupert Murdoch's conservative FOX News Channel were already in violation, and would be forced to sell off stations to come into compliance with the 35-percent limit. The rule change would enable Murdoch to control the airwaves of entire cities. That would be fine with Bush and Powell, since Murdoch is one of

their biggest boosters.

For their part, the broadcast industry has always been one of the biggest spenders to influence government and this situation was no different. It's worth noting that between 1998 and 2004, broadcasters spent a quarter billion dollars on lobbying the federal government, including spending \$27 million on federal candidates and lawmakers.

Now, you would think that FCC deregulation, affecting millions of Americans, would get major play in the media. But the national networks knew that if people found out about how one media mogul could own nearly everything you watch, hear and read in a city, there would be revolt. The solution for them was simple: They just didn't cover the issue for a year. The only thing the networks did was to join in a brief filed with the FCC to call for media deregulation.

It looked like Powell, backed by the Bush White House and with Republican control of Congress, would have no trouble ramming through these historic rule changes. And then, something remarkable happened: Media activists -- an unlikely coalition of liberals and conservatives -- mounted a national campaign to defeat Powell and stop the corporate sell off. The FCC received 2 million letters and e-mails, most of them opposing the sell-off. The Prometheus Radio Project, a grass-roots media activism group, sued to stop the sale of our airwaves, and won in federal court.

If the FCC disregards the issues that people care about (those mentioned in this letter and many others too numerous to mention here), the above scenario could play out again, and again and again. But hey, I'm getting tired of this. How hard is it to understand that when different companies control the TV, radio and newspapers in my community, they compete with each other to provide me better local and national news and information.

And so I am again writing to again say as plainly as I can that I don't want the same company that owns my TV station or my radio station to also own my newspaper. And I will do whatever I must to prevent it (nothing personal).

I rely on my local media sources to find out about national and local issues. And I want to feel confident that I can get all the viewpoints I need to make well-reasoned decisions about these issues. I also want media outlets in my town to care about my needs and interests.

Thank you for your consideration of this important issue. I look forward to hearing from you about your efforts to ensure diversity, localism and independence in our media.